

September 3, 2014

Student Statement in Response to September 1, 2014 Meeting with Chancellor Phyllis Wise

On September 1, 2014, we, a group of graduate and undergraduate students representing concerned members of the student body, met with Chancellor Phyllis Wise and Vice Chancellor Renée Romano. In this meeting, we listed our demands and pursued clarification of the reasoning behind and events surrounding Professor Steven Salaita's unhiring. During our conversation and her recounting of the sequence of events, Chancellor Wise stated that the Board of Trustees requested to speak with her about Professor Salaita which prompted Chancellor Wise to familiarize herself with Professor Salaita and his tweets. Wise went on to say that it was made clear to her that the Board of Trustees would not approve Professor Salaita's appointment. Later in the meeting, Chancellor Wise went on to contradict the now public letter she wrote to Professor Salaita by stating that she had forwarded his appointment and that the Board of Trustees would vote on his appointment at the September 11 meeting. To be clear, any miscommunication that did occur was promulgated by the Chancellor. The contradictions between her public statement, what she told us, and what she subsequently told faculty is either a reflection of a strategic move to discredit the student movement or an indication that Chancellor Wise is not clear herself on what has transpired.

Despite evidence, including the numerous FOIA email correspondences recently made public, Chancellor Wise assured us that her decision was not influenced by donors nor based on Professor Salaita's political views or tweets. However, Professor Salaita's tweets comprised a large part of our conversation, with Chancellor Wise going as far as saying that there are people who believe that some of the tweets he sent would make it very difficult for his classroom to be an environment in which all students would feel welcome. In an attempt to counter the thousands of people that are outraged at the gross violation of academic freedom that has occurred, Chancellor Wise claimed that by unhiring Professor Salaita she was acting in a way that would protect academic freedom on campus. She further stated that his tweets "could be considered freedom of speech" but also stated that the Board of Trustees *did* consider his tweets as part of his record of whether or not he would be able or unable to be a respected faculty member. As we told Chancellor Wise, and reiterate here, we do not feel protected! Instead, we feel that the Chancellor is strategically using the rhetoric of protection and safety to justify this decision, which in effect makes us *more* vulnerable to ignorance, racism, and intolerance by not

honoring academic freedom or supporting American Indian Studies' (AIS) expertise in the field, their governance, or their hiring decision.

It is also critical to mention that the following statements were made and upheld by Chancellor Wise:

- Chancellor Wise hopes that the AIS program can initiate a search for a scholar that is “as respected” and is “as qualified, or more qualified than Steven Salaita is and to be able to attract them to the University of Illinois” to teach on the politics of Israel/Palestine. (We explained to her that Professor Salaita was unique and *the* leading scholar in comparative Palestinian and American Indian studies and that such a search would lead us straight back to him). She explained that she supports AIS’ decision to expand into Palestinian studies, but does “not enter those discussions unless [she is] asked to.”
- Chancellor Wise firmly believes that students, especially those not familiar with Palestine/Israel politics (or what she references as “the Middle East conflict”), be made uncomfortable and made to question their fundamental beliefs in the classroom.
- Chancellor Wise had no idea whether the people emailing her (in support of and against Israel) were donors and stated that many of them she doesn’t know. She further stated that even the ones she does know, she doesn’t keep track of whether or not they give money to the university. She assured us that the decision around Professor Salaita’s hire was not made based on whether it would bring in more money or not. (This statement is especially concerning considering the recently released FOIA email exchanges and documents).

In spite of Chancellor Wise’s contradictory and unclear statements surrounding the unhiring of Professor Salaita the meeting still proved productive for several reasons. First, both Chancellor Wise and Vice Chancellor Renée Romano guaranteed that any and all UIUC community members who speak out against the University’s unhiring of Professor Salaita will be protected and will not face any type of retaliation from university employees or administration. The Chancellor has also agreed to continue to meet with our group. However, for future meetings we expect to receive clear and accurate information rather than be subjected to the politicking that she employed in our first meeting. The initial meeting with Chancellor Wise has not resolved anything, nor has it discouraged us from continuing our efforts to have Professor Salaita reinstated. We will continue to ensure that student voices are heard, we will continue to put pressure on the Chancellor and the Board

of Trustees to reinstate Professor Salaita, and ultimately we will see that academic freedom is restored on this campus. The outcome of this meeting has not left us discouraged but instead incites us to continue our efforts, and we hope it encourages others to work alongside us to protect this campus and our right to academic freedom.

We stand by our statement as the seven undergraduate and graduate students who as representatives of the student body in support of Professor Salaita attended this meeting and are continuing efforts towards his reinstatement:

Ahmad Hamdan, U
Christine Peralta, G
Eman Ghanayem, G
Matt Speck, U
Raquel Escobar, G
Rico Kleinstein Chenyek, G
Stephanie Skora, U